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**THE PROFILE OF AMERICAN YOUTH STUDY:
Results and Implications**

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THE PROFILE OF AMERICAN YOUTH STUDY: RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

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**GOVERNMENT SCIENTISTS MEET THE PRESS:
REACTIONS TO THE RELEASE OF THE "PROFILE OF AMERICAN YOUTH"**

by

Mark J. Eitelberg, Zahava D. Doering, and Wayne S. Sellman

During the closing days of a major research project, scientists often experience the general symptoms of "Headline Fantasy": recurrent images of worldwide press coverage and featured appearances on network television, momentary visions of being interviewed by the "60 Minutes" team or Walter Cronkite (himself), and occasional expectations of being called to do a short guest spot on the "Carson Show." Yet, Johnny never calls, and the newspapers never do seem to have the space for scientific findings. The fantasy soon fades as the once-treasured technical reports gather dust and the researcher wonders why so many copies were ever printed. At least, that's the way it usually happens.

On February 21, 1982, the Washington Post ran a front-page article on the "Profile" study with the title, "Blacks Score Below Whites in Pentagon Test." The story was an "exclusive" for the Post and reporter George C. Wilson. The article contained over 1,000 words that described the study results and assorted reactions--including a brief note on how the results were obtained:

The Reagan Administration has been treating the test results like political land mines, trying to keep them from going off by meeting privately over the last several days with representatives of such groups as the National Urban League, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational [sic] Fund. The administration had planned to hold off releasing the report until March 1.

However, after learning that the Post had found out the test results, Pentagon Officials agreed to discuss them Friday and yesterday. They also called in specialists over the weekend to whip up a summary report for earlier public release, perhaps Monday (Wilson, 1982).

The Washington Post story was picked up around the country by other newspapers and television and radio networks. The research project itself was quickly labled, as Jane Pauley reported on NBC Sunday Night News, "a study sure to become controversial." Since the Post covered the episode with the flair of investigative journalism--emphasizing the newsworthiness of a "semisecret" document and an anxious Administration that decided to dodge "political land mines"--the "Profile" study was promoted as "hard news."

In this paper, the authors attempt to (1) briefly recreate the circumstances leading up to the release of the study results and (2) examine the way in which the study results were reported to the public by the popular media. We undertake this exercise in the hope that others faced with similar situations can avoid the various pitfalls encountered by academic and government scientists who must sometimes "Meet the Press."

In the Beginning

The "Profile of American Youth" project was a direct outgrowth of the recognition that the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) had been miscalibrated since it was adopted for joint use by the Military Services in 1976. When the Department of Defense initially informed Congress about the calibration error--and the fact that the Services had unknowingly admitted a much larger proportion of enlistees from the lower ability ranges--the Congressional military committees were both shocked and incredulous. First of all, most legislators never knew that the scores of recruits were still interpreted against a reference population originally designed in 1944. The assumption in Congress was that the test scores of new recruits were statistically weighed against the scores of contemporary youth--that is, the most current nationwide pool of potentially eligible recruits. Some Congressmen, in reaction, thought that the delay between the time that the Department of Defense first suspected the miscalibration and the official testimony describing it was part of a purposeful deception. They maintained that the Department of Defense knew all along about the inflated test results, and it deliberately concealed the statistical error in an effort to make the All-Volunteer Force (AVF) look better than it was in reality. As far as they were concerned, the AVF was on the brink of falling apart.

Another group of legislators--supporters of the AVF--thought the timing of the Defense Department's "mea culpa" coincided all too perfectly with the Carter Administration's push for a return to draft registration (since the Administration was also campaigning on Capitol Hill for the authority to include women in the registration plan). The admission of error by AVF testing experts--and the consequent enlistment of otherwise unqualified recruits--was seen as an attempt to buttress the scheme for the registration of men and women.

The integrity of the Department of Defense, among both the supporters and detractors of the AVF, was badly undermined. In an attempt to restore some of its credibility and to solve the problem of obtaining a calibration population, the Department of Defense elected to administer its selection and classification test to a national probability sample of American youth. This, it was hoped, would establish once and for all whether the kinds of people entering the military were reasonably representative of the population-at-large (as the Defense Department contended) or the "dummies," "deadbeats," and "social outcasts" so frequently depicted in the critical commentary.

In January 1980, a set of working and cooperative agreements were concluded between several agencies, and the "Profile of American Youth" was officially launched. In the background were two organizations: the Department of Labor (the major sponsor of the National Longitudinal Survey (NLS) of Youth Labor Force Behavior, whose sample was to be administered the ASVAB)

and the Ohio State University's Center for Human Resource Research (the prime contractor for the NLS). In the foreground were the Department of Defense and its contractor, the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) of the University of Chicago (the data collection subcontractor for the NLS).

During the initial stage of the project, the Department of Defense developed detailed plans for data analysis and commissioned several related studies. In part, Defense researchers wanted to protect this work and ensure that a statistical error of the sort that led to the miscalibration would not occur under any circumstances. The commitment to release publicly the test results, as part of the NLS, suggested a level of documentation not normally associated with operational government studies. Two research papers--a review of test score declines (Waters, 1981) and a historical summary of subpopulation differences on ability tests (Eitelberg, 1981)--were commissioned for use as background material on anticipated findings. In addition, NORC was asked to document all aspects of the study in a series of technical reports (Frankel & McWilliams, 1981; McWilliams, 1980; McWilliams & Frankel, 1982). The pretest for the study, the fieldwork and the sample were to be documented in sufficient detail so that any researcher could have easy access to all of the procedures and the rationale behind them (Sheatsley, 1980).

Because of the importance of the sampling components of the "Profile" study to the overall reliability of the ability estimates produced, a peer review committee of experts in the field of survey sampling was asked to provide an independent review of the study sample design and estimation procedures. An independent study to evaluate the suitability of the ASVAB for measuring the aptitudes of a national sample of civilian youth and its equity for females and minorities was also commissioned (Bock & Mislevy, 1981). Furthermore, a Department of Defense team of testing experts and computer specialists conducted a detailed data audit at NORC (Sellman & Hagan, 1981). Finally, as an initial contribution to scholarly study of these data, the Defense Department contracted for an analysis and discussion of possible causative factors affecting the test performance (Bock & Moore, 1982).

The official Department of Defense report, together with the related independent contractor studies, were all scheduled for completion in early 1982.

The Study Hits The Street

As expected, the "Profile of American Youth" results mirrored the results of numerous other predecessor studies in the field of testing research--including the finding that whites score, on the average, considerably higher than blacks, and Hispanics score in between these two groups. When the "Profile" study results were discussed with Dr. Lawrence J. Korb, the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Manpower, Reserve Affairs, and Logistics), the decision was reached to provide a preview of the findings to selected national minority associations before public release of the full report. There were basically four reasons for conducting the special briefings with minority groups: (1) Secretary Korb wanted to ensure that these groups and their spokespersons were personally informed about the study so that they would not be "blindsided" by the release of the report and the

possible misinterpretation of the data by the press; (2) it was felt that these groups, especially, should be made fully aware of the reasons for which the study was conducted and its intended use by the Department of Defense; (3) because of the almost inevitable prospects for misinterpretation of the data and sensationalism by the press, the suggestions of the special interest groups were sought concerning the release of the findings; and (4) in providing the special briefings, the Department had actually hoped to minimize the public attention given to racial/ethnic differences per se and thereby to highlight the true purpose of the project--namely, the comparison of military recruits with their civilian counterparts and the establishment of current national norms for the ASVAB.

In early February 1982, the Department of Defense held a series of meetings with national minority groups. These included the NAACP, the National Urban League, ASPIRA, the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund, the Puerto Rican Coalition, representatives of the Office of the Resident Commission of Puerto Rico, the League of United Latin American Citizens, the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund, and La Raza.

As a background to these meetings, attendees were provided with several of the technical documents available at the time. These included the reports of the pretest and fieldwork, the report on the quality of the ASVAB, and the executive summary of the analysis of possible causative factors. Thus, these groups received background reports only, none of which actually analyzed the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT), i.e., the enlistment test portion of the ASVAB. In addition, Defense technical experts were available during and after the meetings to answer questions.

The reactions of the minority group representatives varied. Generally, they expressed astonishment that the Defense Department would be contacting them--and asking their advice--about a government-sponsored study. In the case of the NAACP, this reaction was intensified and criticism was leveled against the "Profile" study, largely in keeping with the long-standing position of the organization against standardized testing. In contrast to the NAACP, the National Urban League expressed general support for the study. Furthermore, the Urban League representatives stated their personal desires that the results not create any new debate about the fairness of tests--but, rather that they start a national discussion about ways to provide more and better job training programs for young blacks.

Several of the Hispanic groups questioned Defense officials as to why they had not been contacted and consulted at the start of the "Profile" study. Some were concerned, too, about the way in which various different subgroups were categorized simply as "Hispanic" by the data analysts.

While the minority briefings were still being held, the Defense hierarchy was weighing the various possible methods for releasing the "Profile" results to the public. There were four basic alternatives: (1) call a press conference; (2) set up small meetings with selected members of the press and others; (3) issue a press release, but hold no conference or meetings; and (4) release the report without any press release or conference, and mail copies of the published document to interested parties with an appropriate cover letter. These four methods had all been employed in the past, and the positive and negative aspects of each were being carefully considered.

On Friday, February 19th, 1982 the directors of the "Profile" project were informed by the Defense Department's Office of Public Affairs that George C. Wilson, a reporter with the Washington Post, had a copy of the "Profile of American Youth" report. It was quite obvious to the study directors that Mr. Wilson could not have possessed an actual copy of the report. First of all, the report was still in draft form and there were only four copies of the draft in existence. Second, there were no written transcripts of the briefings presented to the minority leaders, and no summary papers of any study findings were ever distributed. In all likelihood, Mr. Wilson had copies of some of the technical materials as well as access to personal notes made at one of the minority leader briefings.

Up to that point, the "Profile" report had been scheduled for release on March 6, 1982 after Secretary Korb's return from an overseas trip. Mr. Wilson, however, did not offer much support in behalf of the Defense Department's plan: he said that he knew a great deal about the study results and the "special briefings" with minority groups and that he fully intended to place an article about the whole affair in Sunday's edition of the Washington Post.

Needless to say, some very quick decisions were made about all of the previously unsettled matters concerning the release of the report. In order to minimize the consequences of any inaccuracies that may have been present in materials or notes made available to Mr. Wilson, Secretary Korb personally provided the Washington Post reporter with most of the pertinent facts regarding the background and content of the study.

Since formal publication of the study results was not scheduled for another two weeks, the Washington Post incident gave rise to a somewhat frenetic weekend on the part of "Profile" study staffers charged with preparing, publishing, and releasing the report. A fact sheet was first assembled for the White House that gave the full background of the effort. A press statement for the news media was also developed. In addition, representatives from each of the minority groups were contacted by phone and informed about the Washington Post incident. Several organizations requested assurance that the Defense Department had not leaked the information in an attempt to embarrass them. Finally, the completing touches were put on the report, it was typed in final form, and two-hundred copies were printed and bound. NORC was contacted and alerted to the fact that, in all likelihood, the organizations and individual researchers would be contacted by a curious press looking for different "angles" to the story. In addition, members of the Department of Defense's ASVAB Steering Committee, consisting of high-ranking officers from each of the Military Services, were notified.

The Washington Post piece appeared on schedule in Sunday's edition. It was quickly picked up by the news wire services, and Secretary Korb found a number of reporters outside his home.

On the Monday morning of the following day, it was decided (in consultation with Secretary of Defense Weinberger) that a general press conference would be held to accommodate the now-clamoring media. At 10:00 a.m., Monday, February 22, 1982 over 50 reporters from newspapers, news services, magazines, radio, and television, some of whom were openly hostile about the racial/ethnic differences emphasized by the Washington Post, packed themselves into the Pentagon pressroom. Secretary Korb conducted the news conference. For those interested, copies of related reports were made available.

During the next four days, the study directors received nearly 400 inquiries. Articles on the "Profile of American Youth" appeared in more than 75 newspapers and in all of the major news magazines.

Press Treatment of the Study Results

In general, there is a two stage process for press coverage of "controversial" research findings. First comes the news article, usually written by the "area expert" in most large newspapers. In the case of the "Profile" study, news articles were written by either reporters assigned to the Defense Department or, in a very few cases, reporters with a modicum of knowledge in the social or behavioral sciences. Smaller newspapers characteristically use the wire service accounts (such as UPI or AP), articles authored by their own Washington Bureau correspondents, or the wire service pieces from the larger and more prestigious newspapers. When wire service accounts are used, the local paper can edit out as much as it wants, and it reserves the right to tack on the jazziest, most eye-catching headline, often suited to its own particular readership.

The second stage will ordinarily occur about three days to one week after the news article has appeared. This is the "news analysis phase"--when the editors of the paper express their own views concerning the study or its outcome, when the local and syndicated columnists have had a chance to evaluate the "larger context" or "true meaning" of the study, and all of the irate or supportive readers have had the time to compose their letters to the editor.

The news accounts of the "Profile" study generally fell into two categories: (1) those that emphasized the racial differences in test results, and (2) those that centered on comparisons between the tested abilities of civilians and their contemporaries in the military. Below is a brief list of headlines from a representative sample of newspapers:

Emphasis on Racial Differences

- "Blacks Score Below Whites in Pentagon Test"
--Washington Post
- "Hispanic, Black Scores Lower on Military Test"
--The San Antonio News
- "Survey Finds Blacks Lag in Math, Verbal Tests"
--Fayetteville (NC) Times
- "Pentagon Calm at Test Gap of Whites, Blacks, Hispanics"
--Baltimore Sun
- "Blacks Score Half as Well As Whites in Pentagon Test"
--Chicago Sun Times
- "Nationwide Aptitude Test Shows Lower Scores For Blacks, Hispanics"
--Education Times

Emphasis on Civilian-Military Comparison

"Volunteers in Armed Forces Test 'Above Average'"
--New York Times

"Volunteer Military Recruits Equal To Civilians on Tests"
--Chicago Tribune

"Pentagon Finds Recruits More Trainable"
--Christian Science Monitor

"How Smart Are U. S. Soldiers?"
--Newsweek

"Military-Civilian Test Score Gap Closing"
--Navy Times

"76-80 Lag In Quality Confirmed"
--Army Times

A third type of "news" article, related only indirectly to the "Profile" study also surfaced in several papers around the country. These were the sensationalist accounts--often inaccurate and typically distorted--probably directed more at arousing readers than reporting the facts. The Los Angeles Times Wire Service (carried in at least 25 newspapers, especially in the West and Midwest), for example, decided to introduce its report on the "Profile" study results with the following lead sentence:

The Defense Department Monday released an independent analysis of its nationwide youth achievement test that cited genetic factors as one reason for the relatively poor performance of blacks and Latinos on the test (Los Angeles Times, 1982).

Similarly, the St. Paul (MN) Pioneer Press, in an article headlined "Study Revives Ethnic Inferiority Controversy," provided the following introduction to its description of the research project: "Whites tend to outscore blacks and Hispanics on standard military qualifying tests because of 'social separation' of ethnic groups, according to a controversial Pentagon study released Monday (Greve, 1982a)." And the Philadelphia Inquirer carried a comparable lead sentence in its report on how "Pentagon Says Low Test Scores [are] Fault of Culture": "A Pentagon study showing that whites tend to outscore blacks and Hispanics on standard military qualifying tests cites 'social separation' of the ethnic groups as a principal cause but also mentions possible genetic factors (Greve, 1982b)."

The first type of article--emphasizing racial differences--was more or less expected. It reflects one major aspect of the historic testing controversy. It also comes at a time when social services are being reduced, and the difference between majority and minority, rich and poor, advantaged and disadvantaged are gaining more frequent mention in political forums.

The primary reason for the popularity of this particular type of article, however, has as much to do with a common misinterpretation of the data by the press as anything else. Beginning with the Washington Post

version, and spreading around the country, many reporters substituted "percent scores" for "percentile scores" and then proceeded to compare groups by referring to percentage margins of difference and "points" scored. Thus, reported the Chicago Sun Times, "Blacks Score Half as Well As Whites" (Chicago Sunday Sun Times, 1982); or, "young black men and women did less than half as well as whites in math and verbal tests . . ." (Washington Post News Service, 1982), "observed one North Carolina paper; or, "scores for whites averaged more than twice as high as those for blacks," remarked Diane Sawyer on the "CBS Morning Show" (Sawyer, 1982). One wonders whether the popular media would have headlined the racial differences on the test if (1) they knew that the finding was quite common and consistent in studies of this nature, or (2) they fully comprehended the statistical character of the test scores shown in the Defense Department report. Suppose, for instance the Chicago Sun Times had captioned the article as follows: "Blacks Score, On The Average, Jus. Over One Standard Deviation Less Than Whites"; or, "On the Average: Pentagon Study Consistent With Previous Literature." Not much on grabbing the reader; not much on selling newspapers.

The second type of article--emphasizing the military-civilian comparison--was probably less used by the popular media than the racial comparison sort. No wonder, material such as that reported by the Christian Science Monitor in "Pentagon Finds Recruits More 'Trainable'," though interesting and informative, is hardly the stuff controversy is made of: "In general, those who join the Armed Services score a bit higher than the national average on qualification tests measuring 'trainability'" (Knickerbocker, 1982).

Controversy does run rampant, however, in the "genetic factors" genre of news stories that appeared. These stories were basically a development of another error by the popular media: the linking of the Department of Defense, directly, with the results of an independent study conducted by one of its contractors (Bock & Moore, 1982). As indicated earlier, in 1980 the Department of Defense commissioned a well-known and respected psychologist at the University of Chicago to perform an analysis and discussion of possible causative factors affecting test performance. This study was to be the initial contribution to scholarly investigation of the new data base--but, like most sponsored research, an effort that in no way reflected the official policy or opinion of the sponsoring agency.

The resulting study of the possible causative factors--titled The Profile of American Youth: Demographic Influence on ASVAB Test Performance--was not available for public distribution when the "Profile" study report was released. But Department of Defense officials elected to release the "executive summary" from the sponsored research report as an example of the type of work that may come out of the "Profile" data base and an illustration of the potential implications of the "Profile" study for social and educational policy. Unfortunately, items were taken out of context by the press from an "executive summary" of a full report that was not yet available.

The "genetic factor" confusion eventually showed up in the editorials and syndicated columns of some newspapers. One columnist, for example, observed that "the people who pushed the Pentagon to do the study in the first place were a group of ultra-conservative Southern lawmakers" who, for the first time since Hitler's government, have dared to spend tax money on "this kind of ridiculous research" (Gonzalez, 1982). In another column entitled "Genetic Inferiority Returns," the "Profile" study was perceived as

a "return to the American-style racism that had diminished but never disappeared." The study marks a return to "Social Darwinism," the author pointed out, and a "comeback" for theories of genetic inferiority so that the new captains of social and economic America can build a case for renewed racial segregation. "The 19th Century is back," the Chicago Tribune journalist reported (Jarrett, 1982).

The irony in this confusion and selective reading of material out of context lies in the fact that the Department of Defense decided at the very outset of the "Profile" study to steer clear of any interpretation of the data. The "Profile of American Youth" report consequently describes the study and simply presents the results of initial analyses. No interpretation is offered and very little material on previous research is even presented in the section that deals with subpopulation differences.

It should be noted here that press coverage centering on the genetics question was not widespread. Most columns and editorial commentary chose instead to treat such issues as social and educational inequality, and the apparent "good news" about the quality of recruits in the All-Volunteer Force. The Washington Post article was also the subject of some harsh criticism by its readers (Washington Post, 1982). In fact, the Washington Post ombudsman later offered a public apology on behalf of the paper. The headline and story were "tilted," the Post's ombudsman wrote; the article probably received too much attention as the lead story on the day it appeared, and it took too much play away from the "principal conclusion of the test: that the All-Volunteer Force is 'above average'." "Altogether," he commented, "I conclude the story was misplayed" (McCloskey, 1982).

In another highly unusual development, the Associated Press issued a retraction of its wire service report that "young blacks scored less than half as well as young whites" on the Pentagon tests. "The story erroneously mixed percentile ratings with percentage scores," the Associated Press admitted, along with a short explanation of percentile scores and a description of the average scores of whites and blacks.

Some Lessons Learned

A few years ago, Lee J. Cronbach offered "some possible generalizations" about the difficulties that arise when the scholar enters the arena of policy (Cronbach, 1975). First of all, Cronbach wrote, "controversies over social science are not created by findings as such. . . . The journalist, by and large, controls what becomes public and when." And, "repeatedly, we have seen journalists mining scholarly reports for controversial copy, distorting the original to make it more exciting, pointing up disagreements, and sometimes reporting only the iconoclastic side."

Problems inevitably follow, Cronbach observed, when scientists enter the public eye through the news media:

The American academic is ill-trained to cope with the media and the public. In his normal life he speaks to a captive, note-taking audience. He writes for archives where those who want his thoughts in extenso can find them, and where the reader can be trusted to weigh sentences in context. But the public reads the headlines and the snappy quotes, and only half-remembers them (Cronbach, 1975).

So it goes that "the academic needs writing skills of an entirely unaccustomed order if he is to make sure that no unwanted implication will be drawn from a buried sentence, that no sentence quoted out of context will advocate what he does not believe, and that no colorful aside will be remembered instead of his main message (Cronbach, 1975)."

The pitfalls of having one's work misinterpreted by the news media and public still hold true. The need to pick and choose with expert care the words and numbers the public see is one of the more obvious "lessons learned" from the "Profile of American Youth" experience described above. But there are, of course, many other lessons.

The first and most important lesson, by far, involves the quality of research--especially that which involves a potentially controversial topic. Good research--based on sound methodological principles, proper planning and execution, with high-quality supporting studies and documents--can almost fight its own battles if a controversy ensues concerning its results. Critics may attack interpretations of the findings or use of the findings or the purposes of the study, or anything else--but, as long as research is reproducible and solid in its development and performance, the findings themselves can stand protected in the face of criticism. Throughout all of the controversy surrounding the "Profile" study, there was not one adverse comment concerning the mechanics of the study or the data analysis.

Another "lesson" involves the need to plan very carefully the manner of public release and the points to highlight in the study. In the case of the "Profile" study, the Department of Defense had hoped to put the results on racial/ethnic differences into perspective by holding briefings with minority groups. As it turned out, the racial/ethnic differences became a focal point precisely because of the briefings. The press, it seems, could not bring itself to disregard this aspect of the study, and the actions of the Department only operated to bring even more attention to the racial/ethnic differences. On the other hand, if the Department had decided to ignore the entire question and focus its own efforts on what it knew best--the quality of its personnel--it is highly unlikely that the Washington Post article and similar stories would have even been written.

Along with the need to lead the press in the areas to be underscored the most, government scientists should follow two important rules: (1) keep the material you give the press as simple as possible; and (2) spell everything out as simply and as clearly as possible, even at the risk of "insulting the intelligence" of the audience. From the very outset, an effort should have been made to explicate the most fundamental points of the study and, of course, the definition of such common (to us) statistical measures as percentile scores. One should always assume, in a variant of Murphy's own Law of Error, the press will probably misinterpret everything you say.

And, oh yes, there is one last "lesson" in studies of this nature: Don't expect Johnny Carson to call. But Carl Rowan or George Will or Jack Anderson or Jack Kilpatrick might very well be banging on your door when you least expect it.

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